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### National Heritage Area dedicated

Posted: Wednesday, Sep 2nd, 2009  
BY: SYLVIA LOBATO

SAN LUIS— All the cultural bases were covered Saturday as the new Sangre de Cristo National Heritage Area was dedicated in the El Convento Plaza.



The invocation was given by Bishop Arthur Tafuya of the Pueblo Diocese and final blessings were given by The Rev. Katherine Griffiths, interim pastor of the Alamosa Presbyterian Church and Todd Barr, president of the Manassa Stake, Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints, while Native Shaman Russell Box blessed the food.

After eight years of research, intensive work, congressional hearings and planning, the heritage area become reality and a cause for celebration.

The designation, signed into law by President Barack Obama March 30, was introduced in Congress by then-senator Ken Salazar, now U.S. Secretary of the Interior, and his older brother, John, a member of the U.S. House of Representatives.

As San Luis Valley natives with roots in Conejos County reaching back to the 1880s, it was a labor of love.

The San Luis Valley has been called the "birthplace of Colorado," since it is home to the oldest town, oldest church structure, oldest Catholic parish, first adjudicated water right, one of two existing commons areas in the nation and the first right for a natural spring.

Acting as master of ceremonies, Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve Supt. Art Hutchinson said, San Luis is where Colorado began surrounded by heritage everywhere; a heritage that goes back thousands of years.

He pointed out that Blanca Peak was revered by tribes for more than 10,000 years and is considered sacred by the Navajo.

Sharing a piece of Valley trivia, he said the Great Sand Dunes Tiger Beetle, found nowhere else on the planet, was first identified by a Father Roget, who worked out of the buildings that are now the Sangre de Cristo Parish at San Luis.

Dan Wenk, interim director of the National Park Service from Washington, DC, said,

U.S. Rep John Salazar cuts the ribbon officially dedicating the Sangre de Cristo National Heritage Area. Pictured, from left, are SalCNHA board member Freddie Jaquez, director Matthew Gallegos, Costilla County Commissioner/Steering Committee Member Crestina Martinez, Alamosa County Commissioner Frank Mestas, Board Member Dennis Lopez, Conejos County Commissioner Joe Mestas, Board Member Dana Maestas, Great Sand Dunes Supt. Art Hutchinson, Board Member/author Emerita Ramero, Debra Goodman from Alamosa County and Fort Garland Curator/Steering Committee Member Rick Manzanares.

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The Environmental Impact Statement is anticipated to be completed in late 2010 and will be available at <http://www.usda.gov/rus/water/ees/ea.htm>.

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"We have another great chapter of America's history here in the San Luis valley with the National Heritage Area designation.

"You can feel the heritage, you can feel what this area has meant to the people for so many years."

Colorado State Historical Society President Ed Nichols added, "If this isn't Colorado history, I don't know what is.

Ushered in by the Omnibus Public Lands Bill, the heritage area could bring up to \$10 million in funding over a 15-year period to preserve the historic, cultural and natural resources in the three counties.

Anna Marie Velasquez, of Antonito, steering committee representative, was honored for initiating the effort. "I was very naive when I started down this path," she said "I thought it would take three years at most."

U.S. Rep. Salazar presented Velasquez with a plaque and bouquet of flowers, assisted by other members of the steering committee.

He said his great-grandfather had red hair and freckles, so he was tortured into paralysis, then sold as a slave to someone who made him a family member.

He went on to marry and purchase the family ranch, which was recently honored as a Colorado Centennial Ranch. "I am glad my 89-year-old mother was there to see it, he said of the presentation, made at the Colorado State Fair.

His younger brother, Ken, now oversees all of the country's 49 heritage areas as Secretary of the Interior, was attending funeral services for Sen. Edward M. Kennedy and was unable to attend the ceremonies in San Luis.

Dr. Matthew E. Gallegos, who will direct the board, talked about preservation work already done and the daunting task to come.

*For the complete article see the 09-03-2009 issue.*

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